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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 001507

SIPDIS

NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR JFRAZER
LONDON FOR CGURNEY
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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE: OPPOSITION MAYOR OF MASVINGO GAINING
GRUDGING ACCEPTANCE FROM RULING PARTY

REF: HARARE 1463

Classified By: Political Officer Todd Faulk for reasons 1.5 (b)
and (d)

1. (C) On June 27, poloff met in Harare with Alois Chaimiti, the MDC Mayor of Masvingo and the first opposition mayor in Zimbabwe's post-independence history. Chaimiti came into office in May 2001 after a typically violent election campaign. In the 13 months since his installation, Chaimiti has gained the grudging acceptance of the ZANU-PF-dominated City Council, and he contends that he is making progress in improving city services and demonstrating that the opposition party is capable of governing. The ZANU-PF Minister of Local Government, Ignatius Chombo, and Governor of Masvingo, Josiah Hungwe, have even begun to acknowledge his presence in public, Chaimiti laughed.

2. (C) When Chaimiti first came into office, the City Council, which comprises two independents and eight ZANU-PF members, had difficulty accepting and working with him, much as the council of Chitungwiza hinders its new mayor (reftel). Difficulties still arise, but now the council generally takes a live-and-let-live approach and is cooperating with the Mayor in improving city services and repaving some city streets. Chaimiti admitted some surprise when the Ministry of Local Government approved in February 2002 his application for city status for Masvingo, which has about 100,000 people. Shortly after his election, Chaimiti sent letters to Chombo and Governor Hungwe signaling his desire to work congenially with them for the benefit of Masvingo. Chombo simply ignored his letter, but Hungwe reportedly became "very angry" and for a long time refused to appear in public with Chaimiti. Recently, however, Hungwe's "hard feelings" appear to have abated somewhat, as he has shown up at some of the same public functions that the mayor attends, and even indirectly acknowledges his presence.

3. (C) Chaimiti attributed the partial turnaround in ZANU-PF attitudes to: 1) the "overwhelming" support the MDC enjoys in urban Masvingo, and 2) the city's ability to raise funds locally and operate independently from the central government. Soon after his election in May 2001, ZANU-PF organized a large, angry protest at the mayor's office. A few months later, a similar effort fizzled because ZANU-PF was simply unable to find enough local people willing to protest against the MDC, Chaimiti claimed. After the March presidential election, a few ZANU-PF youth paraded around town with a mock coffin labeled "MDC" and called for retribution against MDC supporters. However, the retribution failed to materialize, and Chaimiti reported that he has been untouched by the threats of violence or actual violence that befall so many other MDC officials. Furthermore, the city of Masvingo now obtains 90 to 95 percent of its revenues from local residents in the form of property taxes and service revenues (water, sewerage, etc.). The rest of the funds come from bond issues that must be approved by the Minister of Local Government, but the city no longer receives any funds directly from the central government, which is basically broke, Chaimiti said. This gives local authorities much more independence than they used to have. The GOZ is so desperate for funds now that it is even trying to squeeze relatively successful local governments for money. Masvingo has so far resisted the pressure, and instead, has compelled the central government to pay back service fees for the offices and colleges that it operates in town. Chaimiti added that his job is likely to get easier after council elections are held in August of next year.

4. (C) Chaimiti took time to thank the USG for the USAID-funded projects that have built 3,100 housing units in two Masvingo suburbs, and for the USAID-funded good governance project that has improved relations between the City Council and the new Resident Taxpayers' Association. Chaimiti made a pitch for the U.S. to establish a sister-city relationship with Masvingo and inform American cities that they should not be overly wary of Zimbabwe, where they can still be of help. The mayor noted that Masvingo's sister-city relationships with towns in Germany, Sweden and the UK have yielded positive results. Kernan, Germany, for example, has been very helpful by building two clinics in

Masvingo and providing hospital equipment.

15. (C) Comment: The City of Masvingo, with the oldest MDC administration in Zimbabwe, provides a testing ground and possible glimpse of what MDC/ZANU-PF cooperation could be like for the new mayors of Harare and Chitungwiza (reftel). However, ZANU-PF's kid-glove treatment of Chaimiti is less likely due to a genuine desire for cooperation than a realization that its support in rural Masvingo is half-hearted, and ZANU-PF rebel Eddison Zvobgo could mobilize public opinion against the regime province-wide if it inflamed the situation with attacks on the mayor. Nonetheless, the GOZ has to be concerned with the growing independence of local governments and the proving ground they provide the MDC for its ability to govern responsibly in direct contrast to the central government. It may be only a matter of time before the GOZ turns its attention to this growing "problem" and rewrites the legislation that governs local authorities. End comment.

SULLIVAN